

Aristotle's
Nicomachean Ethics

Book 2

Recall Aristotle's definition of happiness from Book 1:

Happiness is “an activity of the soul implying a rational principle” (NE, 1.7, 1098a13)

and

The “human good turns out to be activity of the soul exhibiting virtue, and if there are more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete” (NE, 1.7, 1098a16–18).

Because 'virtue' is part of the definition of 'happiness', we need to understand what virtue is in order to understand what happiness is.

Aristotle presents his definition of virtue in Book 2.

The Greek word for virtue is ἀρετή (aretē).
This is sometimes translated as *excellence*.

virtue (aretē)

intellectual virtues

intuitive reason (nous)

scientific knowledge (epistēmē)

art, know-how (technē)

practical wisdom, prudence
(phronēsis)

wisdom (sophia)

moral virtues

justice

courage

temperance

[and practical wisdom is *needed*
for moral virtues]

We will focus on moral virtues (though without forgetting prudence). Aristotle deals with intellectual virtues in book 5.

Aristotle argues that virtues do not arise in us *by* nature, but we are nevertheless “adapted by nature to receive them” (NE, 2.1, 1103a25)

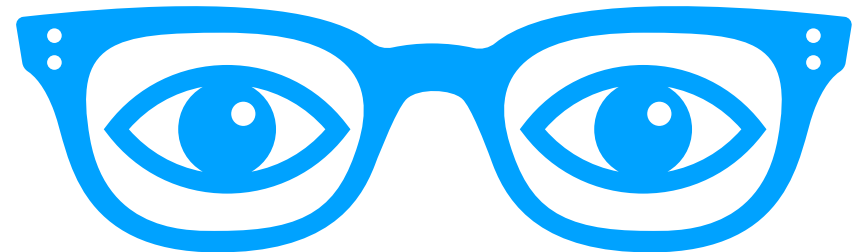
What reasons does he give for the claim that they do not arise by nature?

We can acquire either virtues or vices by habituation. “[N]othing that exists by nature can form a habit contrary to its nature.



“Again, of all the things that come to us by nature we first acquire the potentiality and later exhibit the activity (this is plain in the case of the senses; for it was not by often seeing or often hearing that we got these senses, but on the contrary we had them before we used them, and did not come to have them by using them); but virtues we get by first exercising them, as also happens in the case of the arts as well.” (1103a26–32)

Note that, although virtues are similar to art (technē) in this respect, it differs from art in other respects. How does it differ?



Part of Aristotle's method:

“But this must be agreed upon beforehand, that the whole account of matters of conduct must be given in outline and not precisely, as we said at the very beginning that the accounts we demand must be in accordance with the subject-matter; matters concerned with conduct and questions of what is good for us have no fixity, any more than matters of health.” (1104a1–5)

Note that this does *not* mean what he proposes is merely ‘subjective’. He thinks that what he proposes is objectively true.

Rather, his point is that acting virtuously is not like following a recipe.

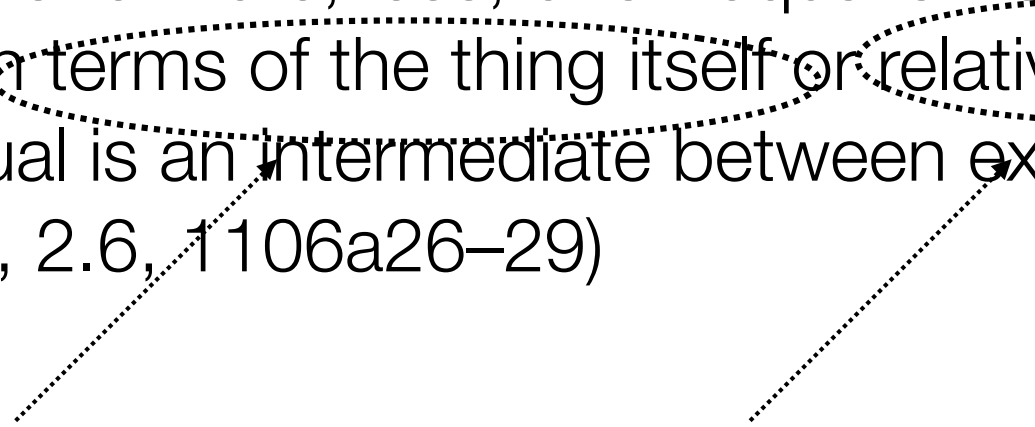
“First, then, let us consider this, that it is the nature of such things to be destroyed by defect and excess, ... For the man who flies from and fears everything and does not stand his ground against anything becomes a coward, and the man who fears nothing at all but goes to meet every danger becomes rash; and similarly the man who indulges in every pleasure and abstains from none becomes self-indulgent, while the man who shuns every pleasure, as boors do, becomes in a way insensible; temperance and courage, then, are destroyed by excess and defect, and preserved by the mean.” (1104a10–27)

Examples?

We cannot understand the ‘mean’ in a mathematical sense.

We should not understand it as a mean which is determined *in the object* but *relative to us*:

“In everything that is continuous and divisible it is possible to take more, less, or an equal amount, and that either in terms of the thing itself or relatively to us; and the equal is an intermediate between excess and defect” (NE, 2.6, 1106a26–29)



Which one is important for acting virtuously?

If we were to say that what mattered was the mean *in the object*, we would have to make the following absurd claim:

if 10 is too many and 2 is too few, then $(10+2)\div 2=6$ must be the right amount. 

Instead, we have to identify a mean *relative to us*.

Example of Milo (the Olympian).

Look again at this passage:

“In everything that is continuous and divisible it is possible to take more, less, or an equal amount, and that either in terms of the thing itself or relatively to us; and the equal is an intermediate between excess and defect” (NE, 2.6, 1106a26–29)

When we are talking about virtuous activities, what kinds of things could be “continuous and divisible”?

Consider examples of courage, justice, and temperance.

That the virtuous person tends to take pleasure in virtuous activity.

“We must take as a sign of states the pleasure or pain that supervenes on acts; for the man who abstains from bodily pleasures and delights in this very fact is temperate, while the man who is annoyed at it is self-indulgent, and he who stands his ground against things that are terrible and delights in this or at least is not pained is brave, while the man who is pained is a coward. For moral virtue is concerned with pleasures and pains; it is on account of pleasure that we do bad things, and on account of pain that we abstain from noble ones. Hence we ought to have been brought up in a particular way from our very youth, as Plato says, so as both to delight in and to be pained by the things that we ought; for this is the right education.” (NE, 2.3, 1104b4–1104b12)

“... virtues are concerned with actions and passions, and every passion and every action is accompanied by pleasure and pain ...” (NE, 2.3, 1104b13–14)

One acquires the virtue by performing the virtuous activity.

So it must be possible to perform a virtuous activity *before* being virtuous.

What does this look like?

How does virtue differ from the arts? (Recall the earlier question.)

“Again, the case of the arts and that of the virtues are not similar; for the products of the arts have their goodness in themselves, so that it is enough that they should have a certain character, but if the acts that are in accordance with the virtues have themselves a certain character it does not follow that they are done justly or temperately. The agent also must be in a certain condition when he does them; in the first place he must have knowledge, secondly he must choose the acts, and choose them for their own sakes, and thirdly his action must proceed from a firm and unchangeable character. These are not reckoned in as conditions of the possession of the arts, except the bare knowledge; but as a condition of the possession of the virtues, knowledge has little or no weight, while the other conditions count not for a little but for everything, i.e. the very conditions which result from often doing just and temperate acts.” (NE, 2.4, 1105a27–1105b4)

Definition of moral virtue:

“Virtue, then, is a state of character [habit] concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e., the mean relative to us, this being determined by reason, and by that reason by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it” (NE, 2.6, 1106b36–1107a2)

Consider each part of this definition:

- state of character (habit) (hexis),
- concerned with choice,
- lying in a mean,
 - the mean relative to us,
 - determined by reason,
 - determined by the reason of a prudent person.

An important qualification:

“But not every action nor every passion admits a mean; for some have names that already imply badness, e.g. spite, shamelessness, envy, and in the case of actions adultery, theft, murder; for all of these and suchlike things imply by their names that they are themselves bad, and not the excesses or deficiencies of them.” (NE, 2.6, 1107a9–14)

How vice distorts vision:

“For the brave man appears rash relatively to the coward, and cowardly relatively to the rash man; and similarly the temperate man appears self-indulgent relatively to the insensible man, insensible relatively to the self-indulgent, and the liberal man prodigal relatively to the mean man, mean relatively to the prodigal. Hence also the people at the extremes push the intermediate man each over to the other, and the brave man is called rash by the coward, cowardly by the rash man, and correspondingly in the other cases.” (NE, 2.8, 1108b17–26)

Course corrections:

“Hence he who aims at the intermediate must first depart from what is the more contrary to it, as Calypso advises—

Hold the ship out beyond that surf and spray. (*Odyssey* XII 219).

For of the extremes one is more erroneous, one less so; therefore, since to hit the mean is hard in the extreme, we must as a second best, as people say, take the least of the evils; and this be done best in the way we describe.

But we must consider the things towards which we ourselves also are easily carried away; for some of us tend to one thing, some to another; and this will be recognizable from the pleasure and the pain we feel. We must drag ourselves away to the contrary extreme; for we shall get into the intermediate state by drawing well away from error, as people do in straightening sticks that are bent.” (NE, 2.9, 1109a30–b6)

Objections to Aristotle's approach to ethics

Aristotle tries to ground ethics in *human nature*.

Does he erroneously try to infer an *ought* from an *is*?

Are some things both 'natural' for human beings and unethical?

(We will need to distinguish between saying that something is *natural* and saying that it is *very common*. Can we?)

Is there a problem with the way Aristotle refers us to the judgment of a prudent person, rather than referring us to a *rule* that the prudent person would follow?